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Venezuela's U.S.-backed opposition leader Juan Guaidó outside a Caracas air force base on April 30. RAFAEL BRICENO/GETTY IMAGES

LATIN AMERICA

Venezuelan Businessman Joined Plot to Oust Maduro—and Escape Sanctions

Media mogul Raul Gorrín played a central role in ill-fated scheme that sought to persuade top officials to help opposition take power, in exchange for having their U.S. sanctions lifted

By [Kejal Vyas](#) [Follow](#), [Juan Forero](#) [Follow](#) and José de Córdoba

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PHOTO: EL NACIONAL/GDA/ZUMA PRESS

Raúl Gorrín, who amassed a fortune while forging alliances with figures in President Nicolás Maduro's government, played a central role in an ill-fated scheme in late April to induce the defense minister, the supreme court's chief justice and the head of military counterintelligence to push out Mr. Maduro, according to people familiar with the matter.

Mr. Gorrín had a simple pitch when he met with the regime figures: In exchange for helping opposition leaders unseat Mr. Maduro, U.S. officials would, as a quid pro quo, lift sanctions imposed on them for alleged corruption and rights abuses, these people said. They could then travel freely and access their money.

The plan called for the top court to issue a decree shifting power from the president to the opposition-controlled National Assembly and [its U.S.-backed](#) leader, Juan Guaidó. At the same time, the court would give the military legal authority to act against Mr. Maduro.

The effort, however, [failed on April 30](#) in a confusing uprising marked by street clashes and the deaths of five people. In its aftermath, [Mr. Maduro](#) leveled rebellion charges against several lawmakers allied with Mr. Guaidó and arrested the vice president of congress. Weakened, the opposition has agreed to [begin talks with the regime](#) in Norway this week, though many opposition leaders accuse Mr. Maduro of using previous negotiations to buy time.

Despite the plot's failure, U.S. officials and opposition leaders say American sanctions on more than 100 Venezuelan officials have succeeded in tempting regime insiders to engage with the opposition—leverage that they want to keep using. The sanctions bar officials from retrieving cash from U.S. banks or using properties in Florida, New York and elsewhere.

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“We have been messaging people in the regime publicly and repeatedly that we are absolutely willing to remove sanctions on any individual who assists in restoring democracy to Venezuela,” said Elliott Abrams, the U.S. special envoy for Venezuela. Senior U.S. officials declined to comment on Mr. Gorrín’s role in trying to enlist regime officials in turning on Mr. Maduro.

An opposition figure briefed on the talks said the sanctions had forced officials to question the cost of their allegiance. “They have unsettled the officials in Maduro’s government, and they also created panic for the families that have been sanctioned,” the person said.

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Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is flanked by Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, right, and Gen. Ivan Hernández, second from right, head of military counterintelligence, in this April photo in Caracas. Their cooperation was sought under the opposition-backed plot to oust Mr. Maduro.

PHOTO: ARIANA CUBILLOS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Maduro government declined to respond to calls seeking comment.

Members of the opposition who orchestrated the April plan viewed Mr. Gorrín as a valuable ally because of his close ties with Supreme Court Chief Justice Maikel Moreno, Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino and Gen. Ivan Hernández, head of military counterintelligence.

Messrs. Moreno, Padrino and Hernández didn't return messages seeking comment. Soon after the attempt to remove Mr. Maduro, Messrs. Moreno and Padrino publicly rejected the plan.

Mr. Gorrín's role in the plot, first outlined by Venezuelan news site ArmandoInfo, was

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An indictment [unsealed in Miami in November](#) charged him with money laundering and bribery. He is accused in separate cases of conspiring to move \$2 billion of embezzled Venezuelan state funds, over a decade beginning in 2008, through bank accounts in Panama, Switzerland and the U.S. Federal authorities seized 24 of his properties, including a waterfront estate in South Florida and apartments on Manhattan's East Side.

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that bribed Venezuelan officials to run currency scams that netted \$2.4 billion. By that time, he was back in Caracas, having fled after the U.S. issued an arrest warrant, the Justice Department said.

“All these guys want to move their money,” said a person familiar with the plan put in place to remove Mr. Maduro. “Gorrín’s motivation is the motivation of all of them. What good is it to have all that money if you’re trapped in Caracas?”

Mr. Gorrín didn’t respond to requests for comment. His friends and business partners reject corruption allegations and say he is being smeared for running successful ventures under an authoritarian regime.

“There’s a campaign to discredit him,” said Oscar Schemel, a pollster close to the government who hosts a political debate show on Globovision.

Mr. Gorrín had clocked a remarkable rise. Raised in a working-class Caracas family, he went in a decade from a legal aide in a Caracas criminal court to the influential owner of an insurance company and television news outlet, Globovision. After his takeover, the 24-hour news station, known for its feisty coverage of the government, pushed a much softer line.

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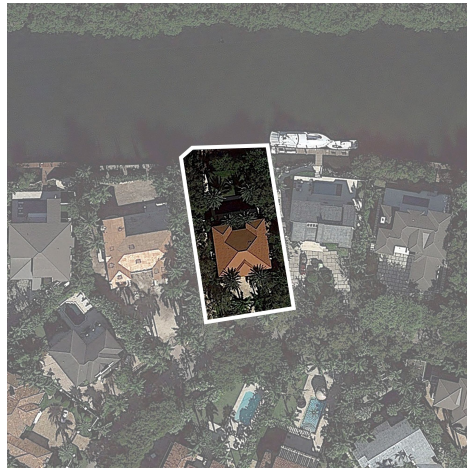
funds. Among the properties were a waterfront estate in South Florida and apartments on Manhattan's East Side.



Sale Price: \$3,500,000

House

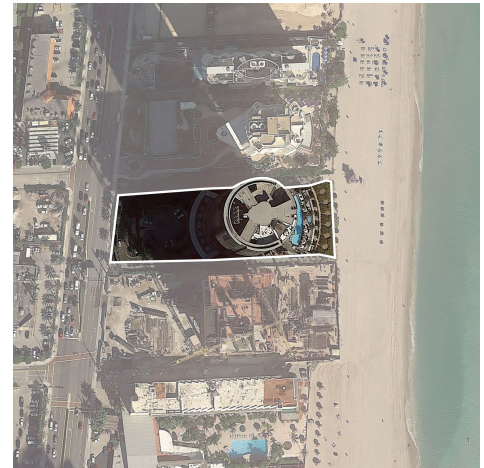
Coral Gables, Florida



Sale Price: \$3,500,000

House

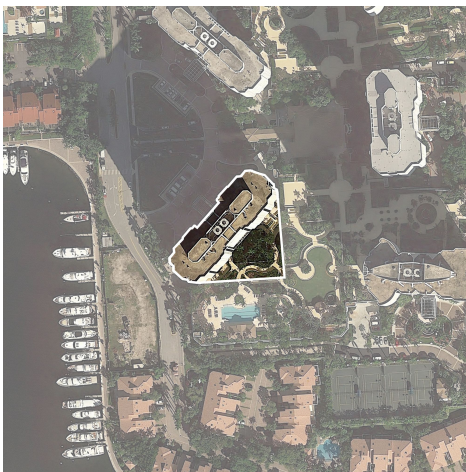
Coral Gables, Florida



Sale Price: \$12,800,000

Apartment, 1 unit

Sunny Isles Beach, Florida



Sale Price: \$1,020,000

Apartment, 2 units

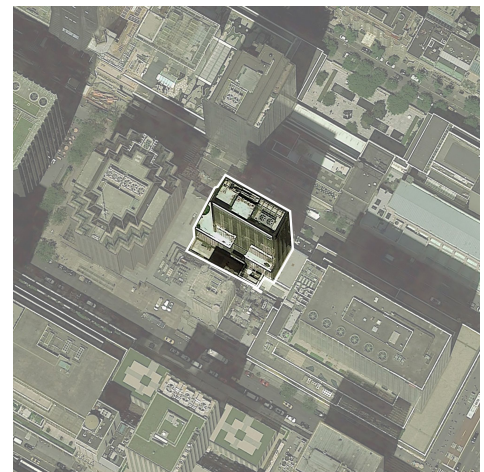
Aventura, Florida



Sale Price: \$4,191,660

Apartment, 11 units

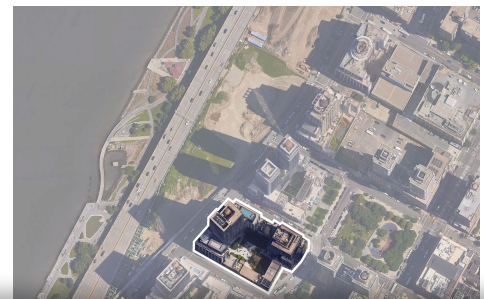
Coral Gables, Florida



Sale Price: \$18,837,625

Apartment, 1 unit

New York, New York



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In 2015, the Venezuelan attorney general's office under Luisa Ortega—now in exile in Colombia—investigated whether Mr. Gorrín and associates bribed Venezuelan treasury officials to take advantage of rigid exchange controls, documents compiled by prosecutors show.

Mr. Gorrín's network moved \$4.6 billion in assets out of the treasury over two years, said Zair Mundaray, Ms. Ortega's No. 2 prosecutor, who is now in exile. He said Venezuelan prosecutors never charged Mr. Gorrín because they believed his close connections to first lady Cilia Flores and Supreme Court Chief Justice Moreno and other judges would protect him from justice.

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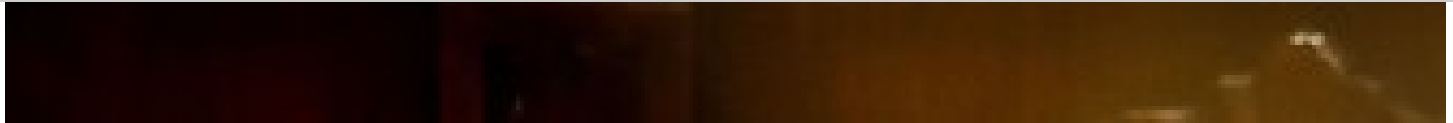
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Supreme Court President Maikel Moreno delivering a press conference in Caracas on May 8. Mr. Gorrín was accused by U.S. officials of laundering money for Mr. Moreno, who was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2017.

PHOTO: RAUL MARTINEZ/EFE/ZUMA PRESS

“Gorrín had complete control over the supreme court,” Mr. Mundaray said.

With U.S. investigators bearing down on him in 2017, Mr. Gorrín lobbied officials in Washington to broker a political out for Mr. Maduro’s hard-pressed regime, according to people familiar with the outreach.

Mr. Gorrín’s efforts bore some fruit in April, 2018, when he organized a visit for Pete Sessions, then a Republican congressman from Texas and powerful head of the House Rules Committee, to Caracas for meetings with Mr. Maduro and other top officials over two days to discuss a detailed plan for a political transition.

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U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, left, met with Raul Gorrín in Florida in 2017.

PHOTO: MIAMI HERALD/TNS/ZUMA PRESS

Mr. Gorrín presented himself to Trump administration officials as a well-connected insider. “He would say things like, ‘I will take this back to Nicolás,’ or ‘This message comes from El Presidente,’” said a person familiar with Mr. Gorrín’s outreach efforts.

White House officials were suspicious of his ties to the Maduro regime. “He gave an indication he wanted to be a player, but we never trusted him,” said Fernando Cutz, a former National Security Council adviser who worked on Venezuela issues.

But Mr. Gorrín had long had ties with people in the opposition, and by the time he left the U.S. for Caracas sometime in 2018 he served as emissary between the opposition and regime insiders open to deposing Mr. Maduro, according to a leading opposition figure.

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Mr. Moreno, the supreme-court chief, a former bodyguard and intelligence agent close to the first lady, was particularly important to the opposition plot. He had been sanctioned in May 2017 along with seven members of the high court for rulings that usurped power from the democratically elected National Assembly and allowed Mr. Maduro to consolidate his grip.

The sanctions deeply worried Mr. Moreno and his wife, Debora Sacha Menicucci, a beauty pageant contestant who won Miss Venezuela World 2014, said an opposition figure briefed on how the sanctions lure was used in talks.

His wife “wants to enjoy the home overseas, the jewelry, the shoes,” this person said.

Mr. Gorrín had a particularly tantalizing calling card for regime figures he contacted: The Treasury Department in March had taken the unusual step of removing his wife from the list of those who had been sanctioned, along with the wife of his business partner.

“The message was, there’s a way out,” said a person familiar with the negotiations. “It’s telling them, ‘We’re serious.’”

Corrections & Amplifications

Raúl Gorrín’s role in the plan to push out President Nicolás Maduro was first outlined on a Venezuelan news site, ArmandoInfo. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that it hadn’t been previously reported. (May 27, 2019)

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